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Is our civilization really  
declining?

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# Is Our Civilization Really Declining?

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WM. DUDLEY FOULKE  
September, 1923

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## Is Our Civilization Really Declining?<sup>1</sup>

Historical analogies are always incomplete and often misleading, yet it is by means of such analogies that history must furnish its most important lessons. The decline and fall of the Roman Empire has already pointed many a moral. Yet a comparison between the civilization of that empire at the beginning of its decline and the civilization of the world today will furnish suggestions far more significant than such a comparison ever furnished before.<sup>2</sup>

At the end of the reign of Marcus Aurelius, the period at which Gibbon fixes the beginning of his "Decline and Fall," a Roman who lived in that period would have been slow to believe that civilization was upon the brink of its final descent. The empire still maintained intact its distant boundaries; its power was unbroken, its wealth unimpaired and the welfare of its inhabitants had been fostered by the successive reigns of five able and upright sovereigns, Nerva, Trajan, Adrian and the Antonines. Gibbon says, "If a man were called upon to fix the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would without hesitation name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus. The vast extent of the Roman empire was governed by absolute power, under the guidance of virtue and wisdom."

The traveler over one of the many admirably constructed highways that led to the remotest corners of the empire with great bridges whose solid arches are still the admiration of mankind, would have seen in every city that he passed, a stately forum, an imposing theatre, luxurious baths, with libraries and lounging rooms, an amphitheatre and a

<sup>1</sup>(NOTE—Published with some additional amplifications from the August issue 1923 of Current History Magazine, The New York Times Company, Publishers.)

<sup>2</sup>(NOTE—Mr. Wells believes that the mass of the people in the age of the Antonines were hopeless and unhappy because, he says, population diminished, showing their failure to have children. But is this failure a necessary sign of hopelessness? Were the people of New England or the people of France before the world war more hopeless than those of Russia? He infers their despair from their indifference to changes in their government. But what changes had there been outside of a regular succession of rulers? Moreover, contentment may beget indifference quite as well as despair. Mr. Wells also refers to the new religions, those of Serapis, Isis and Mithras, and most important of all, Christianity, religions which promised immortality. But when was the time in which men were not eager to adopt a religion which promised blessings in a future world? Except as to the slaves, which under any regime are likely to be unhappy, Mr. Wells' hypothesis does not seem well founded and Gibbon's statement ought to stand.)

circus for public sports, a great number of temples to the various gods and extensive villas surrounded by elaborate gardens, all these objects adorned with statues, bas-reliefs, frescoes and mosaics, many of them far more beautiful than in corresponding cities of the present day. He would have heard poets and other authors and lecturers reciting or reading their productions under the porticoes of the Forum; he would have seen the passing of the legions and have observed their admirable equipment and discipline; he would have attended the courts and heard the elaborate justice of the Roman law applied by the praetors to the causes before them; then coming to Rome itself, after crossing the Campagna with its fourteen stupendous aqueducts, bringing water over a constant declivity of solid arches from mountains nearly two score miles away, after passing under the triumphal arches and gazing upon great columns of victory—after doing honor to the gods in the Pantheon and other temples, he would have beheld in the palaces on the Palatine, the crowning splendour of imperial magnificence, and all this under a ruler beloved by his people and honored throughout the world.

Could it be imagined that the man who had just seen these things would believe that the civilization represented by the Roman empire was even then beginning to crumble into ruin? Yet such was the fact. The seeds of decay had already been planted for two centuries and had been slowly germinating.

Rome had originally been an agricultural community composed of soldier citizens. Its basis was the family, a closer unit here than anywhere else in the world. Each head of a family had absolute authority over his wife and children and their wives and children so long as he lived. He had the power of life and death. He could expose his infants or rear them at his discretion. He might sell his children or grandchildren into slavery. All the property of any member of a family belonged to him alone. It was upon the union of such families in clans and tribes that the Roman state was established.

Over the whole state presided the king, originally chosen in an assembly of the people. His power was as absolute over the citizens as the power of the father over his household. This was a stern and narrow social organization—the community was small but sturdy, and it grew. At last the tyranny of the kings led to their expulsion and then the people in an imperfect way acquired certain liberties. Two consuls were elected every year. Now began the struggles between the patricians and the plebeians. The distinction between these two orders had not been so important while both were subject to the arbitrary rule of the king but now the patricians were possessed of all governmental powers and the plebeians, while liable to military service, were without political rights and suffered from the oppression of their masters. They seceded to the Sacred Mount three miles from Rome, one of the first general strikes recorded in history. The patricians needed them and

accorded them the right to elect tribunes who could protect them by the veto of obnoxious laws. The struggles between patricians and plebeians continued for generations. The plebeians were the victors, winning one magistracy after another until all were open to them. Thus the first nobility, founded upon the right of birth, was extinguished. The rule of Rome spread over Latium, later over Italy and after the Punic wars, over most of the shores of the Mediterranean. This period, the period of the Scipios, was perhaps the time of its greatest vitality though not yet of its most extensive dominion. The will of the people in assembly was nominally supreme both in the election of magistrates and the passing of laws, but in practice the constitution had again become an aristocracy. The senate, which under the king was an advisory body appointed by him and composed of fathers of families, was chosen under the Republic, at first by the consuls, then by the censors and later by the senators themselves and it soon became the actual ruler of Rome. It was composed of men who from their wealth and distinction gradually acquired the dominant power in the state and thus became a governing oligarchy. The assembly was rarely called upon and when it was, this was usually by direction of the senate. Most matters were decided by a *senatus-consultum* without reference to the people. The Assembly could decide for war or peace, but the conduct of war and the conditions of peace were left to the Senate. It was the Senate that assigned the military commands, directed the organization, nominated the governors of new provinces, conducted negotiations, formed alliances and managed finances, and the magistrates became its subordinate ministers. The voters in the assembly were too numerous and widely scattered to be efficient. They lived in all parts of the Roman dominions; many could not come to the city—and the voting by tribes or by centuries, might not represent the popular will at all. The Senate could be assembled in a short time and it included most of the skilled statesmen and soldiers. Their wealth and prestige were employed in securing additional political power for themselves and in excluding new men. The Senate thus became an order of nobility. Its devoted patriotism carried Rome through the dark days of the invasion of Hannibal in the second Punic War. It was during this time that public spirit in the Roman Commonwealth reached its highest point.

But now began corruption. The revenues of Rome were no longer raised by taxes but came from subject lands; the citizen soldiery was supplemented by hired troops; the booty taken in war was appropriated by Roman commanders and their soldiers, and hosts of adventurers settled in the conquered provinces and exploited them. The proconsuls sent to the provinces returned laden with plunder to build sumptuous villas and surround themselves with troops of slaves. Usury, tax farming and other extortions were practiced throughout these prov-

inces and much of the wealth derived therefrom was spent at home in bribery to secure the continuance and increase of the political power and privileges of those who had exacted this wealth. The common people of Rome sank into an increasing mass of idle proletariat. Agriculture in Italy became laborious and unprofitable for free cultivators on account of the importation of slaves and of foreign corn, so that capitalists sought easier means of amassing wealth.

The old religion and the belief in the gods was superseded among the cultivated classes by a spirit of contemptuous and philosophic skepticism. The establishment of the censorship did indeed sustain the morals of the community for a time but this too gradually became ineffective. The new learning, largely Greek, had brought in a revolt against Roman discipline and Cato's efforts against the new fashions were in vain. There was no longer any sound public opinion to which an appeal could be made and Roman society became thoroughly un-republican. The Gracchi led an attack on this senatorial government urging the distribution of the public lands to preserve them from the monopoly of the few, but these leaders lost their lives in the effort, and their reforms had no permanency. Marius, an unlettered soldier, who became for a time the leader of the popular party was overthrown by Sulla who re-established by cruel proscriptions the senatorial oligarchy. The great estates crushed out the small free proprietors who soon disappeared from the open country and left considerable regions of Italy uninhabited. The rush of population to the cities was further encouraged by the gratuitous distribution of bread among the populace who were also attracted and demoralized by the sports of the amphitheatre.

Then came the struggles between Pompey, the supporter of the senatorial oligarchy and Caesar as the representative of the people. Caesar became the undisputed ruler of the state and assumed, although without the name of king, the same regal power which had been overthrown centuries before.

The condition of Rome under the oligarchy had indeed become desperate. The consular offices were openly purchased; the most unbridled luxury prevailed in dwellings, dress, jewels, furniture and on the tables of the rich. Land and sea were ransacked for new culinary dainties. Family morality had become antiquated. The women, wealthy in their own right, had become impatient of control, a new form of marriage had given them greater liberty and they were no longer under the guardianship of father or husband. Love intrigues were constantly in progress and liaisons in the first houses were so frequent that only an exceptional scandal could make these the subject of special talk, still less of judicial inquiry. Celibacy and childlessness became more and more common, especially among the upper classes. Divorces were numerous and the transfer of a wife to a friend was

by no means infrequent. Perjuries in the law courts were common and advocates considered less the justice of a cause than the technical devices by which they could extricate their clients from difficulty. Reverence for law disappeared. There was a "crime wave" of brigandage and assassination; bankruptcies and insolvencies were frequent. Worst of all, the conquests had greatly increased the number of slaves and servile wars were followed by massacres and wholesale crucifixions of the unhappy bondmen. In the words of Mommsen, "Riches and misery in close league drove the Italians out of Italy and filled the peninsula, partly with swarms of slaves, partly with awful silence."

This was the society which Caesar found subject to his dominion. He devoted the five years of his administration to the most thorough reforms. He cut down the corn distributed, limiting it to the support of the poor. He restored order; he proposed extraordinary rewards for fathers of large families. He enacted laws for curtailing luxury. The popular party of which he had been leader demanded the cancellation of debts. He yielded in part, striking off the arrears of interest and compelling creditors to accept debtors' property at the estimated value before the depreciation caused by civil war. He gave to those who might become the slaves of their creditors, the right of ceding their personal estate to save their freedom. He fixed the maximum which money-lenders might loan at less than the value of their landed estates so that the class of capitalists subsisting merely upon interest was eliminated. He relieved the provinces from a great part of the extortions of those who exploited them.

It is clear that these transfers of the power of government from the public assembly to the senate, then from the senate to the monarch had come in answer to a demand for increased administrative efficiency. The clumsy assembly of the people was supplanted on account of the superior efficiency of the senate and when the senate itself became corrupt and inefficient, a single chief was found necessary to administer the complicated affairs of a vast empire. Thus the liberty of the citizen was sacrificed to better administration. This lack of efficiency is often the stumbling block in the way of successful democratic government.

Caesar was assassinated and there followed thirteen years of disorder and civil strife, which ended in the establishment of Octavius as chief of the commonwealth. He, too, to quote his own words, was "master of all things" and the new government or "princely" which he established was a combination of the ancient honored form of the commonwealth with practically unlimited power in his own hands. Shortly after his accession he voluntarily resigned his extraordinary powers to the senate and people of Rome, but this was rather in name than in substance. He never ceased to hold the most unlimited authority and he associated with himself and chose as his successor, Tiberius.

He reduced the senate to six hundred members and made a high property qualification a necessary condition of admission. This enabled him to subsidize those whose property fell short of the standard and they thus became the paid creatures of their imperial master. At his death, after a long reign, he left the Empire firmly established and the administration of the government greatly improved. His successors assumed the splendors of royalty, with extensive palaces, crowds of guards and courtiers and an elaborate court ceremonial. The official worship of the deified Caesar grew into a constant practice. The influence of the Senate continued to decline under Tiberius, Caligula, Nero and Domitian; fantastic extravagances prevailed and the most horrible cruelties were inflicted upon a few unfortunates, yet neither the citizens generally nor the inhabitants of the provinces felt the full burden of their arbitrary power, while under such emperors as Vespasian, Titus, Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian and the Antonines, justice was maintained, and peace, prosperity and security were generally assured.

To the average practical citizen at that time, this loss of political rights must have seemed less important than the universal security, the freedom of trade throughout the empire, the general prosperity and the material benefits conferred by the improved administration of the government.

Indeed if we compare the condition of Rome at that time with the condition of society today, we must confess that the former had many advantages. The danger of foreign war did not exist, no barbarians could advance far beyond the frontier; Italy and Rome were absolutely safe. Even the peril of domestic dissension must have seemed remote after a succession of emperors who had preserved internal tranquility.

Today there is no one nation strong enough to maintain peace throughout the world, none so powerful but that its neighbor, in conjunction with others, may overthrow it in "the next war", while the efforts to create an industrial and economic revolution threaten almost every country on the globe. The barbarians are no longer on the frontiers but in our midst. We are by no means so safe against either foreign or domestic foes as were the citizens of Rome in the days of the Antonines.

But the rule of a vast empire by one man was certain in the end to lead to disaster, not only because the welfare that depends upon the personal virtues of the ruler is transitory, nor because arbitrary power will ultimately corrupt the best and ablest man, but still more from the fact that public interest in affairs of a government where one man's will controls is certain to decay. The Roman suffrage had been gradually extended by the emperors, but this suffrage could by no means imbue the citizens with the same devotion to the state as that which

had distinguished the early citizens of Rome. They devoted themselves instead to the pursuit of wealth or pleasure.

The fall of Rome began when Marcus Aurelius died A. D. 180, and his son, the tyrant Commodus, neglected the public business and set an example of profligacy which corrupted the community. Disintegration proceeded rapidly, and after he was assassinated, the succeeding emperors began to be chosen by the soldiers alone, especially by the Praetorian guard stationed at the capitol. These men actually sold the imperial power to Didius Julianus, who promised them the largest gifts. Then Septimius Severus was made emperor by the Illyrian legions and after a strong military administration, the empire devolved on his son Caracalla, a cruel tyrant who plundered the province and first opened the way for the irruption of the Goths.

Emperors good and bad followed with startling rapidity; the infamous Heligabulus, Severus Alexander, the barbarian monster Maximin, the Gordians, Decius and others. The invasions of the barbarians began, Goths, Franks, Burgundians, Vandals, Alemanni. Under Gallienus there were barbarian conquests in Roman provinces from Spain to Asia. Nineteen pretenders to the throne appeared and Gibbon suspects that in the wars, tumults and disorders that everywhere prevailed nearly half the inhabitants of the empire perished.

Rehabilitation began under Aurelian and the barbarians were temporarily expelled. But when Diocletian ascended the throne, the old ideas of the Roman commonwealth had disappeared. The emperors were altogether the choice of the legions in distant provinces and seldom saw their capital. For better government a colleague was chosen by the autocrat with whom he shared his dominions and his title of Augustus; then two Caesars of somewhat lower dignity were added. But quarrels arose between these rulers and although under Constantine, Julian and Theodosius the imperial power was again occasionally held for short periods by a single sovereign, yet in the main, administration was divided between contending rulers. Taxes were enormously increased, leading to general distress; the most inquisitorial methods, including torture and capital punishment were employed in their collection. In the meantime, art, literature and philosophy had greatly degenerated.

When Christianity was established by Constantine as the religion of the state, it had already become a religion of dogmatism and infected by many superstitions instead of a religion of love and brotherhood as in its earliest days. There was much theological intolerance and there were persecutions that almost rivaled those under the Pagan emperors.

In the meanwhile administrative abuses constantly increased, and so great was the misery entailed that in Campania, one of the important divisions of Italy (to quote Gibbon's words)

"Within sixty years after the death of Constantine, and on the evidence of an actual survey, an exemption was granted in favor of three hundred and thirty thousand English acres of desert and uncultivated land; which amounted to one-eighth of the whole surface of the province. As the footsteps of the barbarians had not yet been seen in Italy, the cause of this amazing desolation, which is recorded in the laws, can be ascribed only to the administration of the Roman emperors."

The Roman world was soon permanently divided into the empire of the East and the empire of the West. Rome was sacked by Alaric the Goth, who had twice already invaded Italy, and later, the Vandals, who under Genseric had overthrown the Roman provinces in Africa, established a kingdom at Carthage and created a formidable naval power, seized the ancient capital of the world, delivered it for fourteen days to indiscriminate pillage and returned with rich spoils and many thousand captives to Africa. The Roman people after long misgovernment had become so apathetic that they made no serious resistance. The theatres, baths, palaces and monuments of the city, now falling into decay, soon became mere mines of material, cheaper for building purposes than the more distant quarries. Thus the noblest examples of ancient architecture were rudely defaced or demolished. Since the Romans themselves would no longer fight, barbarian auxiliaries became the soldiers of the empire, only to subvert it for themselves. Count Ricimer, the leader of the German mercenaries, elevated and deposed one emperor after another who served him as his puppets or vainly resisted his power, until finally the last of the Caesars, Romulus Augustulus was deposed by Odoacer the chief of the Heruli and other German bands in the pay of Rome, who now became the ruler of Italy, to be succeeded by Theodoric the Ostrogoth as king. By this time all the provinces had fallen away—Spain was occupied by the Visigoths, Gaul by the Franks, Visigoths and Burgundians and Britain by the Saxons. The empire of the West no longer existed. The Latin language was corrupted (and in England extinguished) by the barbarian dialects of the North—Roman jurisprudence was gradually superseded by the rude laws of the conquerors with their confiscations, their pecuniary fines for homicides their distinction of castes, their newly imposed servitude and their trials by compurgation, by battle and by ordeal.

There was for a short time a restoration of Roman rule under Justinian, the emperor of the East, but it soon came to an end. The Langobards, fiercest of all the tribes of the North, established their sovereignty over the greater portion of Italy, destroying the civilization of the past, and the whole western world now entered into that period of history which is appropriately called "the dark ages" a period of private warfare, general brigandage and essential anarchy which in its turn gradually led to the development of the feudal system.

The empire of the East, which was rather Greek than Roman, lasted much longer, but in spite of the oriental splendor of the court, its decaying civilization flickered fitfully under the tumult of barbarian Persian and Moslem warfare without, and the constantly growing degradation, misery, corruption and superstition within, until the final capture of Constantinople by the Turks completed its extinction.

Now let us apply the teaching of Roman history to our own civilization. It may seem incredible in view of the immense material progress we have made during the last generation in the discoveries of science, in the development of steam, electricity, the telephone, the automobile, the phonograph, the cinema, the submarine, the airship and aeroplane, as well as in wireless telegraphy, the radio, chemistry, medicine, surgery and sanitation, that we should even suspect a decline in our civilization. But many of our new discoveries have brought evils far greater than the benefits conferred. The submarine is manifestly injurious. Chemistry, which has discovered new methods of cure has also brought with it the poison gas and the higher explosives for the destruction of whole communities, while the airplane furnishes the readiest means for their application. The cinema and the automobile have often furnished an undesirable distraction and have greatly promoted crime. That there are new conveniences and luxuries around us does not mean that the world is improving, any more than the construction of the great baths of Caracalla or Diocletian meant that the Roman empire was becoming greater and better. The real progress or decline in civilization depends upon human character.

Before the world war we should not have questioned the progress of America even in this respect. President Roosevelt had done an enormous work in infusing into our people higher ideals and aspirations for unselfish and patriotic service. The days had passed when Tweed, Fisk, Gould and their successors in corruption were admired because they had secured vast wealth by iniquitous practices, and these men had come to be justly regarded as malefactors and undesirable citizens. Vast numbers of young men enrolled themselves for all kinds of public service and both during and since the war innumerable "drives" and countless organizations for the public benefit have introduced a new era in respect to co-operation for the common good and especially for the relief of the unfortunate. Open prostitution has largely disappeared from our great cities. Whatever be our views as to prohibition, intemperance among the workingmen, whose families were the chief sufferers, has been largely curtailed by the new amendment and the Volstead law. When the war closed there was general rejoicing that the world had at last become "safe for democracy." Monarchs had fallen, the peril of Kaiserism was past and popular government appeared secure.

But enormous evils have sprung into public notice since that time



and there are still others more impalpable but not less perilous which have been lurking in our midst for a much longer period.

First and most fundamental of these, the ties of the family have been dangerously relaxed. These ties used to be very strong in America, especially in Puritan days and while the great tides of emigration were filling the Mississippi Valley. As in early Rome, the authority of the head of the family was not disputed. He had not indeed the power of life and death, but the family property belonged to him and his commands were generally obeyed. Both in Rome and in America this regime was characteristic of a growing state. It is true that no one would now go back to the harshness and severity of Puritan or early Roman times. The emancipation of women was just and was socially desirable. The mother ought to share with the father the dominion over their children during infancy and adolescence. But we have gone much further than this. In many households the father has been relegated to the position of a "*banquier donne par la nature.*" The disintegration of families has progressed further than would have been believed a century ago. Hasty and improvident marriages and ready facilities for divorce have greatly encouraged it. In many communities the proportion of divorces to marriages has been enormous. This proportion is largest among the wealthy classes, just as in Rome at the time of the oligarchy and in this respect we have apparently nearly reached the condition which prevailed shortly before the transformation of that republic into an empire.

Second. A necessary corollary of this loosening of the family ties is seen in the lack of discipline, which indeed pervades all society, but is most observable in the education of the young. It is conspicuous in the bad manners so common among American children due to a lack of home and school training in the ordinary courtesies of life. America is perhaps the worst country in the world in this respect. The loud mouthed insubordinate American boy is too often in evidence and in too many homes it is the disorderly child who controls and the parent who acquiesces. Manners may be themselves of little consequence but they are an index of character.

In the training of the intellect and will this lack of discipline is more general and more injurious. It seems to be directly encouraged by modern methods of education which have supplanted the narrower and stricter methods of the past. Our older system was indeed undesirable in one direction, just as the present methods are undesirable in the other direction. It used to seem as if the greater the amount of torment which could be inflicted upon the youthful mind the greater would be the benefit. In "The Hoosier Schoolmaster" we had a glimpse of the time when "lickin and larnin" went together. There was much learning by rote. By the most irksome repetitions the multiplication table, English orthography and the rules of grammar

were driven into the memory and later there was an appropriate drill in the classics and mathematics. Then we began to hear that instruction by rote was of no value at all; that memory was of little account; that even parrots could memorize; that the old theory of disciplining the mind by Latin, Greek and mathematics did not prepare children for the actual life before them; and above all, that they should develop their minds in their own way, that learning should not be driven into them but original thought elicited. Self development became the slogan and many elective studies were given. Every branch of education was to be made attractive. There was to be no compulsion. The royal road to learning had at last been found.

Now in all this change there was a great deal that was valuable. Self development and the encouragement of originality is immensely important, but these new things grew so luxuriantly that they stifled the earlier essentials. Modern educators do not fully realize that mere memory is of the highest importance to success in life. The capacity to recall and hold in the mind all the important matters bearing upon the things on hand is essential to the best results and the cultivation of memory and even learning by rote, very properly formed an important part of the old system.

But there is one thing still more important and that is the power of a human being to control his will even against his desires, the power of doing disagreeable things cheerfully. The man who is thus master of himself is the only one who can be trusted to meet successfully the issues of life and the education which omits that discipline fails in perhaps the most important single object of education. Success will always depend largely upon drudgery, and unless the young have the ability to undergo its discipline they are not well equipped for life. "Self-expression" must go hand in hand with "self-control." The plan of allowing elective courses, which is valuable after the choice of a career is made, has often led to the demoralization of education in its earlier stages. The pupil elects the easiest course and slips through with the least trouble and least advantage to himself. The effort to make learning easy has led to such innovations as "visible education" furnished by the movies and other pictures. This of course may be made the means of communicating information in the shortest possible time and the pleasantest possible manner and has its proper subordinate place in instruction, but the tendency of such things is to crowd out from the course of study the supreme element, the control by the pupil of his own intellect and most vital of all, of his will. "The curriculum swells and the minds of the operators of the curriculum shrink." It is in this way that the disuse of the classics and of higher mathematics has been disastrous. It is well enough to say that a man does not need these in business, but until an effective substitute is supplied in the discipline of the mind they ought not to be given up.

Modern languages afford no such substitute. Imagine the training which a student will get by the substitution of such child's play as Spanish in the place of a really difficult language like the Greek. The tendency of modern education is to encourage flabbiness of intellect as well as of will power.

When a boy is graduated from a high school and passes to a university he is received with a mere certificate of proficiency without the rigid examination that used to be required. He enters often with insufficient preparation, sometimes to drop out, sometimes to pass by selecting the easiest courses and "skinning through" with a minimum of work. No wonder that Mr. Edison found by his questionnaire that college graduates were ill equipped. It is quite clear that both in the home and the school discipline has been neglected.

Third: Closely connected with the disintegration of family life and the lack of discipline is the decline in religious faith. Herbert Spencer, himself an agnostic, has shown the need of religion in binding together social and political organisms. A belief in its sanctions whether they be the hope of heaven and the fear of hell or merely rewards and punishments in this life has quite as strong an influence over human action as the fear of the laws. The man who believes that every act of his life is watched by an all-seeing divinity, whether it be the God of the Christian or the Jupiter of ancient Rome is controlled far more effectively by this belief than the rationalist who sees nothing but the mere tendency of certain acts to produce happiness or misery in a certain limited class of cases, while others seem exempt from all rewards or punishments. The early Roman feared the gods, and this common fear of common divinities kept the tribes together and strengthened them in their national undertakings. But afterwards, during the period which led to the decline, a philosophic indifference to the ancient superstitions became prevalent among the higher and more intelligent classes. The same thing is true today. In our Puritan times the fear of God was supreme. Church going and daily family devotions were well nigh universal. Now our places of worship are more scantily attended, services at home are largely discontinued and among the more intellectual part of our community agnosticism is prevalent. It may be said that our rationalists are on the average quite as good citizens as anybody else, and this is mainly true. Yet is it not also true that the habits created by religious belief continue by mere inertia for one or more generations after that belief has ceased, but that finally the absence of religious sanction will become apparent in the conduct of life and the loosening of social ties. It certainly was so in Rome during the period which led to the demoralization and final overthrow of the republic.

Fourth: Not only has public spirit been weakened by the lack of family, educational and religious discipline, but there is strong reason

to fear that the human stock itself is deteriorating by uncontrolled sex selection in marriage. The rich and the most intelligent are apt to have small families, the poor and the less intelligent are apt to have large families. In the late Eugenics Congress in New York, it distinctly appeared from statistical studies that our present civilization is cultivating a race of incapables. The defectives and criminals continue to increase. According to Horatio M. Pollock, statistician of the New York State Hospital Commission, the ratio of defectives per one hundred thousand of population increased from one hundred and eighteen in 1890 to two hundred and twenty in 1920. If the tendency shown by these figures really exists, then sanitary science and benevolent establishments, in conserving the lives and promoting the propagation of defectives, tend to make evolution work backward and promote a survival of the lower types. If this should continue indefinitely it must lead to our undoing. No class of our community is so certain to propagate its own kind as the mentally defective. The condition of Europe in this respect is worse than that of America. The war eliminated much of the more energetic element and it is to the inferior remainder that the world must now look for the propagation of the species. The proposed remedies of sterilization, segregation and birth control seem at present both inadequate and impracticable and the cultivation of the eugenic conscience appears to be largely visionary. How far this deterioration will go it is difficult to say. Reformers like Caesar and subsequent emperors attempted to encourage the propagation of the purer Roman stock by suitable rewards—exemptions from taxes and special honors given to the heads of large families—but no important permanent results were thus secured.

Fifth: Another tendency of the times in which our civilization resembles that of the Roman commonwealth just before its fall is the drift of population from the country to the city. In Italy this was caused by the successful agricultural competition of the provinces and was encouraged by the exemption of the city from taxation and later by the free distribution of corn to the inhabitants. These encouragements are lacking in our own country, yet the competition of our western lands and our increasingly varied industrial activities has led to the abandonment of some of the farming land in New England and in other earlier settled regions and to the decrease of population in many rural districts elsewhere. In early days our urban population did not amount to fifteen per cent of the whole. We were mainly, like Rome in its earlier days, an agricultural community. Now a large majority of our people live in cities and towns. The sturdiness and independence of a preponderating rural life are gone. The manners of the town with its multitude of attractions and distractions have made our population more and more like the Rome of the millionaires

and the proletariat rather than the Rome of the growing agricultural commonwealth.

Sixth: Next we come to a tendency toward the concentration of vast capital in the hands of the few, a tendency which history shows is fraught with the seeds of decay more certainly perhaps than any other. Even before the Roman commonwealth was tainted by this blight, it had appeared in Carthage. There the enormous wealth acquired by successful commerce was accumulated in the hands of a few great families which became rulers of the state. Corruption won every favor, character degenerated, and Punic faith became a byword for all time. It was the plutocracy of Carthage which paralyzed the arms of Hannibal and finally led to the extermination of the state and city. The accumulation of vast wealth in the hands of a few was probably the most important single cause which led to the ruin of the Roman republic. In the words of Pliny "*Latifundia perdidere Italiam.*" Since that time other illustrations of the baleful effects of concentrated capital are equally instructive. The democratic institutions of Florence crumbled when great riches were acquired and the republic began to be controlled by a few wealthy families among which the Medici became supreme. Cosimo dei Medici held no office, yet by his control through money of the lists from which magistrates were selected, he governed the state. Under Lorenzo the Magnificent, the council of the people was deprived of its functions and he acquired absolute control of legislation, and under his successors, Florence became a prey to tyranny, bankruptcy and ruin, with the sentiment of liberty entirely extinct.

Much the same story could be told of the republic of Venice where the government fell into the hands of the Great Council, composed exclusively of the wealthy merchants of the city. Venice like Rome, lived a long time in spite of this corrupting influence, but finally the ancient virtue perished so completely that at the first sound of the cannon of the young Napoleon, the old aristocracy voted its own abdication and disgrace.

Other examples could be given.

"This is the moral of all human tales,  
'Tis but the same recital of the past;  
First freedom and then glory; when that fails,  
Wealth, vice, corruption, barbarism at last,  
And history with all her volumes vast  
Hath but one page."

The transition is at first imperceptible. Republican forms are preserved, there is nothing to strike the imagination or awaken fear. When the rich took possession of the Roman commonwealth, the magistrates, senate and assembly were the same as before. It was only the power which underlay them that had become shifted to the hands of a few. In America today there are single private fortunes greater than were possessed by any noble or monarch of antiquity, fortunes that could buy kingdoms, fortunes that have bought legislatures,

sometimes directly, sometimes by vast campaign contributions or by inculcating the fear of panics and bad times or by combinations of one interest with another, to raise tariffs or secure franchises and favorable legislation. For a time our Federal Senate was composed mainly of millionaires, and great monopolies arose which controlled the prices of the most necessary articles of life. The organization of these great combinations went on most rapidly during the administration of Presidents Hayes, Garfield, Cleveland, Harrison and McKinley. At last the people began to see the dangerous results of this tendency and under President Roosevelt, there was a vigorous reaction, numerous laws were passed for controlling the trusts and the Supreme Court dissolved some of the most obnoxious organizations. But the work was incomplete, and during and since the great war, the accumulation of vast fortunes, especially from war profits, has gone on in much the same way as before Roosevelt's time. It is true that the great middle class of our community has not been eliminated, as in the Rome of Cicero, or in the Russia of today. It is still strong and virile. It is true also that we have no longer the curse of human slavery, though the masses of workmen in huge industries form a special class which is not without its menace to the state. As a sequel to the accumulation in the hands of a few of this vast wealth and the power which accompanies it, revolutionary ideas have arisen which propose to destroy all rights of private property, involving the overthrow of the most essential principles which have prevailed in all countries since the foundation of human society. Communism has indeed made much greater progress in other countries than with us. In Russia it has led to the dictatorship of the proletariat followed by awful miseries. But even in America the notion of "direct action" to secure favors for special classes seems to be invading all society. Certain small sections of the community are seeking to secure by strikes, lockouts and often by violence, higher wages, profits and other advantages which they cannot secure by legal means.

Seventh: A general regime of lawlessness has spread over various sections of the country. This is shown by the so-called "crime wave," though we do not yet know whether it may not rather be a tide that long rises and at last ebbs slowly away or perhaps even a stream whose progress will continue permanently. This lawlessness is explainable partly as the aftermath of a great war, but it has not been due only to this cause. A great proportion of the crimes perpetrated by bank robbers, footpads and others have been committed by very young men, too young to have gone into the war. These crimes are undoubtedly due in great part to lack of suitable training for the young and they have been aided by two of the recent products of modern progress, first by the "movies," which have depicted crime and its details, often in most attractive colors to the young; next by the automobile, which

has furnished easy escape and immunity for the felonies committed. This flood of crime is not unlike that which prevailed in Rome during the last days of the oligarchy and in the earlier periods of the empire. The lines of Juvenal are filled with invectives against these troops of lawbreakers who then, as now, were often composed of young men belonging to the privileged classes. But in every stratum of society violence is rampant. The streets of Chicago today are no safer than were the streets of Rome. We have indeed long been the one self governing community which has shown the greatest disregard for the statutes that our own representatives have made. The reign of lynch law has been for generations a national scandal and for us this era of increased lawbreaking is fraught with more than ordinary danger.

One of the main causes of crime is the impunity which is given to criminals by the technicalities of our criminal procedure and by the excessive application of the rule that the accused must be proved guilty beyond all reasonable doubt, to the unanimous satisfaction of twelve jurymen; that he cannot be required to give evidence against himself nor be examined except by his own consent as to the circumstances of the alleged crime, nor be put twice in jeopardy, even though his acquittal is a manifest mistake. All these safeguards were thrown around him at a time when the English criminal code was barbarous and the innocent needed protection, but they have survived into a period when the law is far too humane to wrongdoers and they lead to practical impunity and to the commission of many other crimes far more injurious to the state than the rare punishment of a single innocent person.

More than this the criminal even when he is convicted, is punished with such softness and gentleness as often to make his sentence no punishment at all, or one that does not deter others from crime. His "reformation" is so ardently sought, by indeterminate sentences, by "good time" deductions, paroles, pardons and the like, that the greater rights of society are overlooked and law ceases to be a terror to evildoers. Here too, our philanthropic impulses have led to such flabbiness as seriously to undermine that respect for the law which is the cornerstone of civilization.

Eighth: I do not suppose that intolerance is in itself a sign of degeneration. A primitive and growing community may be extremely bigoted, being ignorant of the advantages of reasonable toleration. But a relapse into intolerance, of a great nation founded upon universal equality, a nation which had expressly protected in its constitution, freedom of speech and of the press and whose boast it had been that it was the refuge of the oppressed everywhere—this is a distinct sign of degeneration. We have suffered from such a relapse due in part to the great war, when all utterances which crippled military operations were properly prohibited, yet since that time complete liberty

of expression has been by no means restored. Those whose political views are unpalatable, are persecuted by public opinion and worst of all the attacks made upon the followers of certain religious belief such as Jews and Catholics, by such organizations as the Ku Klux Klan, which has spread with amazing rapidity, indicate a melancholy deterioration in our ideals of justice and fair play.

Ninth. Another indication of the decline of public spirit is the apathy which prevails in regard to public measures. We have laws submitting to the people by referendum and sometimes by initiative the most important legislation. It is rarely that our people cast a full vote upon these measures. This resembles the apathy prevailing in Rome under the Empire, which had indeed the excuse that public action could change nothing when the sovereign was supreme. We have no such excuse. If this apathy continues it is indeed of sinister omen, for democratic government depends wholly for its vitality on the active interest of the citizens. Mr. Bryce in his great work on Modern Democracies, has reminded us that there have been many centuries during which the people have been quite unmindful of the kind of government to which they were subject and he has warned us that such periods may occur again. Should they do so the ruin of free institutions is inevitable.

Tenth. The decline in literature and art generally comes later than the decline in political institutions. The golden age of Roman literature and the best in its architecture and sculpture followed the extinction of the republic. Only a short time however after the reign of the Antonines, deterioration was clearly perceptible. The arch of Septimius Severus is not equal to those erected at an earlier period. The bas-reliefs on the so-called arch of Constantine show unmistakably the degradation of sculpture and still more so the sarcophagi and monuments of the early Christian period until at last we come to the grotesque and barbaric decoration of the era of the Langobards.

In America we are still near our best, but the vagaries of the so-called "futurist" schools are furnishing a sinister forecast of the depuration of taste, while in the drama our deterioration is conspicuous, in the public demand for the commoner forms of vaudeville and burlesque and for gorgeous scenic representations and motion pictures rather than for the works of the masters. We seem to be at a period corresponding to that in the late Roman republic where performances with vast numbers of dancers had supplanted the earlier comedies. Moreover while sexual immorality exists in all stages of the progress or decline of civilization yet public exhibitions whose purpose or tendency it is to stimulate sexual passion are a distinct evidence of degeneration. Such exhibitions are more general and more daring than they used to be. Fifty years ago the fleshings of the "Black Crook" were subject to criticism; today there is hardly a comment on the more than semi-nudity of many of the revues which seem to be approaching the nakedness of Parisian

exhibitions, until even the untranslatable infamies of degraded Byzantium do not seem far away.

Eleventh. Another resemblance of present conditions to those attending the fall of the Roman empire is seen in the vastly increasing burden of taxation imposed upon the people. The great war is of course the cause of much of this, but by no means of all of it. Municipal taxation in many parts of the country was constantly growing and had already become excessive before the war. There were parts of New England which lost portions of their population by excessive taxation. There were towns in many sections of the country where the levies made for unnecessary public improvements led to bankruptcy and there was much increase of governmental and municipal activities in fields which used to be reserved for private enterprise, and where bad management often led to heavy burdens without corresponding advantages. The present project of raising a "bonus" for soldiers amounting to billions of dollars from public funds which must be raised by taxation is much like the largesses bestowed at public expense upon the Roman legions and Praetorian guards and the consequences are certain to be disastrous not only in increasing taxation but in encouraging exorbitant claims and undue pressure in enforcing them. The exactions of taxation so demoralized the Roman people that great masses abandoned their homes and vast regions became depopulated.

In Rome not only were the taxes enormous but the method of collecting them was inquisitorial and cruel. Gibbon tells us "An oath was administered to the proprietors which bound them to disclose the true state of their affairs and their attempts to prevaricate or elude the intention of the legislator, were severely watched and punished as a capital crime, which included the double guilt of treason and sacrilege."

We used to raise most of our taxes without severe inquisitorial methods. But in the recent income tax, excess profits tax, etc., these have been introduced and although only fines and the penitentiary have been thus far prescribed as punishments, we are already upon the same road as in the days of the decline of Rome. When taxes became too oppressive men will no longer work to produce the wealth upon which they can be levied. Property will be destroyed rather than continue subject to intolerable burdens. As in the East, where the date tree which could not bear fruit enough to pay the tax upon it was felled to the ground, so everywhere where taxes make property unremunerative property will cease to exist. In a number of industries that point has been reached today—if the increase continue indefinitely the widespread destruction of property is certain.

After all these things it is hard to resist the conclusion that there is a distinct tendency toward decline in modern civilization. But is this to be temporary or permanent? On the restoration of the Stuarts, English civilization certainly waned, yet it was rehabilitated and ad-

vanced to the Victorian era. So too in Italy; after the degradation of centuries came the *risorgimento* with the rise of the new Italian kingdom. But even in these cases, the re-habilitation may be transitory. Rome too was at several periods temporarily rehabilitated, and both England and Italy as well as all other European countries are, since the world war, showing dangerous symptoms of renewed social degeneration, more dangerous indeed than anything which has yet appeared in America.

The permanent trend of civilization is a matter of a long time and he would be a rash prophet who would venture to predict the outcome very far ahead. We can only see the principal sources of danger today and it is only to a limited extent that we can provide against them. A general evolutionary drift of mankind is to a large degree uncontrollable. The loosening of family ties and of discipline, the decline in religious faith, the drift of population toward the cities, the intolerance of the opinions of others, the apathy of the people in regard to public measures, the deterioration of literary and artistic standards—these things are quite beyond legislative control and can only be corrected by a radical change in men's opinions and beliefs, which, to be effective must penetrate every stratum of society. Better methods in public education, the elimination of defectives and the physical improvement of the race, the more just distribution of wealth, the more effective suppression of crime and lawlessness, and some relief from the burdens of excessive taxation—these things can indeed be secured by better laws and the more effective enforcement of them. But this too, requires that in a democracy public spirit should be sufficiently aroused to secure such legislation and to choose the proper instrumentalities to enforce it. This of itself is an enormous task, but the first essential for this task is that we should thoroughly realize, not merely by the assent of our intellects but by the earnest conviction of our hearts just what the danger is and how grave it is. It is for this purpose that the foregoing article has been written.

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